

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 PM-04 NSC-05 SP-02 SS-15
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R 251697Z MAR 77
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO /SECSTATE WASHDC 6174
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 2045

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PINS, TS
SUBJECT: ARREST OF BEN SALAH ASSOCIATES

REF: TUNIS 1879, TUNIS 1947

1. FOLLOWING UP ON ITS MARCH 21 PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE ARREST OF 23 ASSOCIATES OF AHMED BEN SALAH, GOT HAS BEGUN PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN TO JUSTIFY ITS ACTION. PARTY AND GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED PRESS HAVE CARRIED STRONGLY WORDED EDITORIALS DENOUNCING BEN SALAH'S ACTIONS AGAINST THE INTERNAL SECURITY AND POLITICAL STABILITY OF TUNISIA. THEY HAVE EMPHASIZED FAILURES OF BEN SALAH POLICIES WHEN HE WAS IN POWER AND CONTRASTED THEM TO THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS ACHIEVED SINCE 1970. IN MARCH 24 PRESS RELEASE, THE GOT PRESS AGENCY RECOUNTED BEN SALAH'S FAULTS (HIS POLICIES, TAP SAID, HAD REDUCED PRODUCTION LEVELS, AGGRAVATED UNEMPLOYMENT, WEAKENED COMMERCE, DEVALUED THE DINAR AND PARALYZED THE INDUSTRIAL AND CONSTRUCTION SECTORS OF THE ECONOMY WHILE PERSONAL LIBERTIES WERE DENIED AND CITIZENS WERE PERSECUTED AND DEPRIVED OF THEIR POSSESSIONS). TAP CLAIMED THAT
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BEN SALAH WAS NOW SEEKING TO UNDERMINE THE REGIME JUST AT THE MOMENT THAT THE WHOLE NATION IS ABOUT TO UNDERAKE THE FIFTH DEVELOPMENT PLAN. RADIO AND TELEVISION HAVE ALSO CARRIED ANTI-BEN SALAH COMMENTARIES.

2. ENGINEERS' UNION STRIKE, CALLED IN PART TO PROTEST

ARREST OF MOHAMED BELHAJ AMOR,HAS ENDED. ENGINEERS HAVE APPARENTLY ACCEPTED PROMISES FROM GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS TO HAVE THEIR SALARY AND WORK RULE DEMANDS BEING STUDIES. TRADE UNION LEADER HABIB ACHOUR, ONE OF TUNISIA'S MOST IMPLACABLE OPPONENTS OF BEN SALAH, PLAYED DIRECT ROLE IN ENDING STRIKE BY NEGOTIATING BETWEEN UNION AND GOT.

3. LAWYERS DEFENDING THE BEN SALAH ASSOCIATES ARE NOT YET SURE WHAT SPECIFIC INDICTMENTS WILL BE MADE AGAINST THEIR CLIENTS. REFERRAL OF CASES TO STATE SECURITY COURT, HOWEVER, INDICATES THAT THEY WILL BE ACCUSED OF VIOLATING ARTICLE 175 OF THE PENAL CODE REGARDING INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL SUBVERSION AGAINST THE STATE. DEFENSE LAWYERS BELIEVE THAT AS MANY AS 25 OTHER ARRESTS OF BEN SALAHISTS HAVE BEEN MADE IN RECENT DAYS BASED ON INFORMATION OBTAINED IN POLICE INTERROGATIONS OF THEIR CLIENTS.

4. GOT PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN AGAINST BEN SALAH WILL STRIKE RESPONSIVE CHORD AMONG TUNISIANS OVER 25 WHO HAVE VIVID MEMORIES OF THE GRIM SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CLIMATE OF THE BEN SALAH YEARS. HEDI NOUIRA'S POLICIES HAVE BROUGHT SUBSTANTIAL IMPROVEMENTS IN THE LIVING STANDARDS FOR THE MAJORITY OF THE POPULATION SINCE 1970 AND MOST RECOGNIZE THIS FACT. IF GOVERNMENT CAN DEVELOP CONVINCING CASE THAT BEN SALAHISTS WERE ACTUALLY PLANNING OVERTHROW OF REGIME BY ILLEGAL MEANS, IT CAN PROBABLY DEFUSE WHAT RESENTMENT WE HAVE NOTED AGAINST ITS INTOLERANCE OF OPPOSITION POLITICAL ACTIVITY.
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